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Book Review:

Michael John Law, *The Experience of Suburban Modernity: How Private Transport Changed Interwar London*, (Manchester: New York, 2014)

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The Experience of Suburban Modernity: How Private Transport Changed Interwar London

MICHAEL JOHN LAW

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Suburbia is an unpromising place to find modernity. Even the word connotes sameness, tedium, the suburbs considered as a singular collective experience of routinized boredom. Interwar critics like Osbert Lancaster regarded its inhabitants and mock-Tudor architecture as intellectually and aesthetically regressive: the privet-primmed, chrysanthemum-choked eternal return of the same, not the embrace of modernist difference. Law aims instead to turn this on its head, reconstructing the new mobilities of private transport between 1928 and 1938 – the changing form, function, and accessibility of car, motorcycle, bicycle, and plane – to show how life in the suburbs could be 'fast, fluid, dangerous and fun' (p. 7). There is good reason to call this 'the experience of suburban modernity', a title borrowed from Marshall Berman: the thrill of tearing around Croydon airfield on a five-shilling flight (p. 61), for example, embodied the 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' identified by Berman as characteristic of modernity.[i] Yet while providing important answers to dismissals of suburbia, this book raises as many questions about exceptionality, historical time, and causation in our models of modernity; questions compelling us to recognize what we exclude through our desire to include those previously denied the title 'modern'.

Departing from the late 1920s, when closed-body cars caused the increase and diversification of ownership, Law traces a route from the growth of private transport

to the new concrete arterial roads transforming its reach and ride. He pulls up at the new spaces created for the increasingly mobile suburbanite – the cavernous roadhouse, the floodlit Hoover Building and car showrooms on Western Avenue – examining their potential for startling spectacle and equally startling social and visual disorder (p. 157) before braking at the humdrum normality of commuting set by the late 1930s. Though discussing the increasing popularity of cycling and visits to airfields like Hendon for RAF Display Days (pp. 66-68), he focuses on how the development of metalled, straight arterial roads and the more comfortable environment of closed-body cars transformed the phenomenology and uses of driving, weakened radial ties to central London, and made possible new social opportunities and risks. Through innovations like the in-car radio, cars themselves became extensions of domestic space at the same time as they were increasingly used by families, following H. V. Morton's example, in search of England (p. 150, p. 86). Changes in car and road technology could have more extreme effects of isolation and insulation. The narrowing of perspective caused by enclosed windscreens, for example, limited the driver's view of the world and the world's view of the driver. Car interiors became increasingly alienated from the world they traversed, which was compressed into succession of flitting images (pp. 155-156), but also, correspondingly, they became intimate spaces for sex away from the scrutiny of home: the razor gang of Greene's *Brighton Rock*, sojourning on the London Road, exemplified the trend – and the concern (pp. 131-132).

Where such neat ties are made between specific technologies and the intensifying contradiction of excitement and risk – Berman's 'unity of disunity' – Law makes a strong case for suburban modernity fuelled by private transport.[ii] But at times the reader might wonder whether this modernity had not happened elsewhere

before, and if it had, where the precise difference fell.[iii] Betjeman's poem 'The Metropolitan Railway' (1954) hints at this ambiguity. For Law, the poem expressed the critic's distaste for the car-created suburbs of the 1930s that supplanted those of earlier railway extensions. Its 'nostalgia for Edwardian suburban life' signalled the emergence of a dizzying independent mobility 'free from the constraints of public transport' (pp. 4-5). This mobility was more spontaneous, faster, less restricted to radial journeys, and more often a family affair (pp. 31-32). Yet Betjeman's poem as much recalled the invigorating freedom provided by the electric tube train ('Early electric!', the poem begins…) and the ease of journeying from 'autumn-scented Middlesex' to Oxford Street and back. Transformations in the tube and motorbuses from 1905 occasioned many of the changes that Law attributes primarily to later developments in private transport. Contrary to the claim that '[e]lectrification was just a change in the fuel, not a change in the way suburbia was experienced' (p. 9) it radically affected the speed, frequency, and spontaneity of tube travel: the Piccadilly Line operated a two-minute peak-time service from its opening in 1906 and the network's speed overall averaged 18mph in 1920, when road traffic rarely broke 8mph.[iv] Meanwhile, LGOC motorbuses, operating a tangle of non-radial routes, more than doubled annual passenger numbers to 1,834 million between 1919 and 1928, when this book begins.[v]

Recognizing these crosscurrents is not a question of widening the topic – focusing on private transport fills an important gap – but of exploring symptoms of models of modernity as a discrete condition of being. In order to claim that it was historically particular but did not emerge from nothing, such models placed modernity within a series of 'phases'. At the cusp of critiques of 'modernization', Berman could still write in 1982 that modernity emerged from 'the dialectics of modernization and

modernism': the twentieth century was in the third phase of this dialectic.[vi] Such unwieldy questions are not Law's concern but the consequences of the model are because of the summary temporal distinction it necessitates between one experience and another. One effect of this is to downplay antecedent patterns in public transport: for example, working-class rail commuting represented 'a distinct modernity' but, puzzlingly, 'would not fit into the themes of this book' (p. 12). Another is to overstate the relation between rising car use and modernity, eliding correlations with causes in order to highlight technology-led change. The dependence of a roadhouse like the Ace of Spades on an increasingly mixed clientele of motorists undoubtedly shaped its nature as a socially liminal space (pp. 128-130). But what made independent mobility a necessary, far less a sufficient, cause of the 'possibilities and perils' of modernity? We might think of Lyons teahouses in central London, despite the obvious differences, as comparably ambiguous spaces.

Attempting to 'liberate' ourselves from condescension of our suburban subjects (p. 7) is surely a good thing. But as Chakrabarty notes, awarding modernity to those who missed out in the, quite arbitrary, first round of distinctions does not necessarily make them more 'equal', risks the proliferation of spaces explained as paradoxically singularly and collectively modern, and potentially confuses an already confusing analytic.[vii] Nonetheless, these are only traces in a book that otherwise comprehensively charts the growth and phenomenological experience of new suburban mobilities.

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[i] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (London, 2010 [1982]), p. 15
[ii] *Ibid*., p. 15
[iii] See for example James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern*, (Berkeley: Los Angeles: London, 2014), p. xi
[iv] T. C. Barker and Michael Robbins, *A History of London Transport: Passenger Travel and the Development of the Metropolis, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century to 1970*, (2 vols, London, 1974), II, 116
[v] *Ibid*., 215
[vi] Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, pp. 16-17
[vii] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Muddle of Modernity', *American Historical Review*, 116, 3, (2011), p. 665, p. 672